

Promoting Disability Awareness through Children's Literature

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Under the inclusion model, students with disabilities are being educated more frequently with their non-disabled peers. Typically developing young children may have a difficult time adjusting to students who look, sound, or behave differently, which can negatively effect an inclusive environment. This project focuses on using children's literature to promote disability awareness and allow students to view their peers with disabilities in a positive and relatable way. *Lilly* is a poetic story for beginning readers that depicts a young girl with an intellectual disability who does not have functional speech. *Simon* is a narrative for young readers that relates the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a third grader with bipolar disorder. The two books help fill a gap that is present today in children's literature.

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Author's Statement

As an Exceptional Needs: Severe Intervention major at Ball State University, I am passionate about advocating for students with disabilities. I approached my creative project as an opportunity to use my personal interests and talents to raise disability awareness and acceptance. Throughout my practicum and student teaching experiences, I have seen negative reactions to the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their nondisabled peers. The aim for my project is to create children's books that encourage positive interaction between students with and without disabilities.

My courses prepared me to complete a project focused on disabilities; however, I had little to no experience in the area of writing and illustrating children's literature. Before I began my project, I knew that it would be important to familiarize myself with terms and techniques commonly used by authors and illustrators of picture books. I used many different resources in order to accomplish this, but the most helpful and influential resources I used included the text *Literature for Young Children* and a chapter from the textbook *The Joy of Children's Literature*. I learned valuable stylistic information that I could use in the creation of my project, including information on concept books, picture storybooks, and illustrations in picture books (Glazer & Giorgis, 2005). For example, I used the method of color, or lack of color, to convey character, mood, and emotion in my illustrations, as described in *The Joy of Children's Literature* (Johnson, 2011).

Next, I read and dissected the text and illustrations of influential picture books. To find the most successful and influential of these books, I looked to winners

of the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award. Winners of the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award include authors and illustrators that demonstrate creativity and imagination to engage children in reading. The books must be original and function successfully for an audience of beginning readers (American Library Association, 2015). Influential books that I studied included *The Watermelon Seed* by Greg Pizzoli, *Tales for Very Picky Eaters* by Josh Schneider, *Bink and Gollie* written by Kate Dicamillo and illustrated by Alison McGhee, *Are You Ready to Play Outside?* by Mo Willems, and more. These books for young readers inspired me to be original and creative with my work.

In order to develop my initial ideas for the project further, my next step was to familiarize myself with the books that specifically portrayed individuals with disabilities that were currently available to students. By doing so, I reasoned that I could make an educated decision on the specific need for my project and the direction that would lead me to my objective. I began researching books that positively depicted children with disabilities. Although there are many books that depict a child with a disability, there were few books that met this criterion that were widely known or read. To find the most popular and influential books that students would have access to, I specifically looked for books that had earned the Dolly Gray Award.

The Dolly Gray Award is an award presented yearly to acknowledge a work of children's literature that appropriately portrays individuals with developmental disabilities. The award was created by members of the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), and

the Special Needs Project. I searched for books that had received this award in order to distinguish important qualities and styles that effectively communicated positive messages about children with disabilities. Such books included *Ian's Walk* and *Keeping up with Roo*. ("Dolly Gray," 2014)

Ian's Walk is a story written by Laurie Lears and illustrated by Karen Ritz. It depicts a young boy with autism spectrum disorder. The author addresses the character's disability by telling the reader what makes Ian different using phrases, such as "sees things differently," "hears things differently," and "smells things differently" (Lears, 1998). The story is told not from Ian's perspective, but from the perspective of one of his older siblings. *Keeping up with Roo*, written by Sharlee Glen and illustrated by Dan Anderson, was also told from the viewpoint of a family member of an individual with a disability (Glen, 2004). Although the book depicted an individual with an intellectual disability rather than an individual on the autism spectrum, both authors chose to tell the story from a similar point of view.

As I continued to research books that depicted children with disabilities, I found that telling the story through the viewpoint of a friend or family member of the character with a disability was a consistent technique. Although this is an effective strategy for describing and depicting what goes through the minds of those who interact with children with disabilities on a normal basis, it does not put the reader in the place or emotional state of the student with the disability. When I discovered this, my goal became to write at least one of my books from the perspective of the character with the disability.

Another trend I discovered while researching current children's literature was the depiction of characters with Down syndrome, physical disabilities, or autism spectrum disorder. It was difficult to find books that depicted children who had emotional disabilities, mild disabilities, or speech and language impairments. It was obvious that I discovered the gap in the literature that I was searching for. I believe that it is crucial to have various categories and severities of disabilities represented to students, so that they understand such differences and varying abilities exist. This discovery and belief helped me decide which disabilities to depict in my own books. Between the two books, I decided to represent a student with the emotional disability of bipolar disorder (*Simon*) and a student with cognitive and speech impairments (*Lilly*).

Once I had decided to write a book depicting a child diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I began researching this specific emotional disability in more depth. Although I had experience working with an elementary school student with bipolar disorder in my first practicum through Ball State University, I knew that I needed more information to create a book that would truly capture the daily thoughts, emotions, and struggles of a child with this disability. I also wanted to get insight from actual students diagnosed with bipolar disorder, so that I would be able to more effectively write the story from the perspective of the character with the disability, as was my goal.

I found helpful articles, websites, and books on bipolar disorder that gave me the insight and information I needed in order to create a character that would truly embody a child who had bipolar disorder. For example, "The Storm in my Brain:

Kids and Mood Disorders” was an excellent resource that provided a general description of bipolar disorder, symptoms and feelings children with the disorder may experience, and possible treatments. It also answered questions children or parents may have and provided artwork created by children with bipolar disorder. For example, the resource included a drawing by a 13-year-old girl with bipolar disorder. The drawing depicted the child’s varying moods and feelings by showing multiple facial expressions beside clocks that displayed different times of the day (Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, 2015).

Bipolar Disorder, also known as Manic-Depression illness, is an emotional disability that affects a person’s thoughts, feelings, and moods. It includes what are called manic episodes and depressive episodes. During manic episodes, the individual may experience symptoms such as feeling happy or silly in an unusual way, talking quickly about various topics, a short temper, trouble sleeping or an abnormal amount of energy, and difficulty focusing. During depressive episodes, the individual may experience symptoms such as sadness, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, head and/or stomach pains, and thoughts of death or suicide. (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015).

Bipolar disorder can be dangerous, especially for younger children who are not experienced in regulating and controlling their emotions and actions. Although signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder often begin in the teenage years or early adulthood, the illness does occur in school-aged children. This is called “early-onset bipolar disorder.” Throughout my experience in an emotional disabilities classroom,

I was able to work with a child with early-onset bipolar disorder and observe the way he interacted with his peers. There was not always a noticeable difference between the child and his peers; however, on days in which the child was not able to regulate his emotions in an effective manner, he acted on his temper and often frightened his peers. Children were frequently reluctant or afraid to play with the child and interact with him because his moods and actions were unpredictable. In my book, *Simon*, I wanted to address this situation from the child's viewpoint and try to provide other students with the insight they might need in order to positively interact and have an ongoing relationship with a child who may commonly experience manic or depressive episodes.

Once I had thoroughly researched bipolar disorder, I decided that I needed to “flesh out” the character. By writing out the character's gender, age, personality, and characteristics, I knew that I would be able to present a cohesive and realistic character that students would be able to relate to. Before I began writing, I brainstormed and determined that the character would be a male in the third grade. I wanted to place him in an inclusive classroom setting with his same-aged, typically developing peers. I developed the character's likes, dislikes, and personality. I also determined that I could more effectively present his relationships with his peers by focusing mainly on his relationship with one student and including only basic interactions between all other students. In this way, I could go more in depth on the character's reactions to others and the difference even one child/friend can make in the day of a student with bipolar disorder.

Once I finally began drafting the text for *Simon*, I had developed an in-depth character and determined how he would react and feel during various situations. I decided that the most effective way to depict Simon's disability would be to provide students with a glimpse into one possible day of his life. Based on my personal goals for the project, I chose to show the child interacting with friends and classmates during an average school day. The plot of the story focuses on his physical and emotional reactions to specific activities, people, and situations. The overall message I chose for the narrative was to accept and love people who may not act, think, or respond in the same way as you. This explicit theme is shown at the end of the story when Simon and his mother are discussing his friendship with Marco: "Just because we may not always understand how you feel, doesn't mean we don't care about you."

While writing the narrative, I sectioned the text into activities, times of the day, and situations. For example, the story begins with a section depicting the main character's morning as he prepares for his school day and interacts with his mother, then moves on to a section in which he rides the bus and interacts with his friend Marco. Once I had finalized my writing, the sections made it easier for me to determine page breaks and possible illustrations. I wanted to make sure that I chose illustrations for each page that would capture Simon's feelings and reactions and/or the reactions of his peers.

The materials I used to illustrate both *Simon* and *Lilly* included artist pencils for sketching, a black-tipped artist marker for outlining, and watercolors, watercolor pencils, paintbrushes, and blenders to provide color and contrast. I chose to create

the illustrations for *Lilly* using bright colors and simplistic drawings with little to no background. The book was created for young, beginning readers. I did not want to provide this audience with elaborate, detailed illustrations because I determined that illustrations of a simplistic nature with less background would create a clearer focus for the children. There is little text on each page, and the text that appears is large. This, again, is due to the audience I intended for the book.

Although I used the same materials and medium for *Simon*, I chose to aim for a different audience. *Simon* is intended for students in approximately 1st-4th grade. There is more text on each page, and the text consists of larger words that may be more difficult for beginning readers. The illustrations use colors to help enhance the depiction of characters' specific moods and feelings. For example, when the main character is angry, the colors may be bright and aggressive. When the character is sad, the colors may be duller or shades of gray. In this way, the colors and contrast create a mood that enhances the reader's understanding of the text.

While authoring and illustrating *Simon*, I continued to develop ideas for the book that would depict a child with both a cognitive and speech impairment. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a cognitive impairment or intellectual disability is described as "significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior." A speech or language impairment is described as "a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child's educational performance." (Smith & Tyler, 2010)

Although I completed some research for these disabilities as well, I had a great deal more experience working with children in practicums and student teaching placements who were labeled with cognitive disability and speech and language impairments. I modeled the main character, Lilly, after a specific student I worked one-on-one with in a practicum setting. The student was extremely social; however, without functional speech, she found it difficult to positively interact with her peers. She would often stand too close to children, poking and touching them to get their attention. Most of her peers did not respond well to these actions because they felt that the student was constantly in their personal space, and they expressed confusion when she tried to interact and play with them.

In *Lilly*, I wanted to bring these situations to life for other students and show them that interacting with children who may be different from them can be rewarding. I also wanted to show children that although all individuals may not be able to communicate through speech, it does not mean they will not share some of the same interests and abilities. Although they communicate differently, children with speech and language impairments can nonverbally communicate and interact with others in a positive way. I explicitly displayed this message when I repeated the phrase about the various children liking to run, jump, laugh, and play. The use of repeated phrases is used in many different books for young children and beginning readers, so I determined that using a repeated phrase to express the theme of the story would provide a clearer message to the intended audience.

Because *Lilly* has less text than *Simon*, the plot is strongly supported through illustrations. For example, near the end of the story, the illustrations depict the two

unnamed characters in the story finally looking at Lilly in a different way. As the children see the positive and friendly interactions between Lilly and June, they finally begin to look at her as a possible friend or playmate. In the final illustration, the children all successfully include each other by participating in an activity they all enjoy. Without the added support from the illustrations, the text at the end of the story would not form a cohesive plot and conclusion for the readers.

Once the text and illustrations for both books were completed, I used Microsoft Word to put them together and form each book. The process included scanning all the illustrations and saving them as jpegs on my computer. Next, I opened a Word document, pasted in the images, and wrapped the text. In order for the illustrations to blend in properly with the page, I had to edit the images by cropping them and deleting any unnecessary background. I chose a font that would be easy for children to read and appropriately spaced words and phrases. Finally, I included page numbers and saved the document as a PDF. The books were then completed and ready to be emailed or printed.

When I initially approached this project, I saw it as an in-depth, but fun and rewarding task. I planned to complete the project in one semester. However, I had underestimated the amount of time and effort this project would take. I spent half of the semester researching children's literature, writing techniques, illustration techniques, and various disabilities. Conceptualizing both books was a grueling task because I was insistent that I create books that were unlike what was currently available for students and that would positively influence the attitudes and perspectives of typically developing students. Once I decided on topics and

developed plot and characters, I created and edited multiple drafts of each book. By this time, it was the end of the semester and I had to extend the project to a full two semesters.

Utilizing an entire school year to complete my creative project was time-consuming, but it allowed me to put in the time and effort needed to truly make this project the quality I desired. I insisted on holding myself and my project to a high standard not only because I am a hard-working and driven student, but also because I created my books with the intention and hope of one day getting them published and contributing to disability acceptance and awareness in schools. I want my books to go beyond fulfilling a graduation requirement for Ball State University's Honors College; I want *Simon* and *Lilly* to become positive influences in support of students with disabilities.

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